

## Psalm 124 Sermon during Covid

Today we're finishing off our brief journey in the Psalms having looked at four different types of Psalm – a Psalm of praise, an acrostic poem about God's laws, a Psalm of lament, and then this morning, a Psalm of Ascents. Hopefully by looking at one of each, we've enabled you to better approach the great storehouse of worship and raw emotion that is the Psalms and navigate your way around a bit better. During lockdown and with all the anxiety about lockdown easing, it is particularly precious that we have these words of devotion, of desolation, of worship and of honest troubledness to give us both a model in approaching God and also perhaps words when we struggle to have any.

Today's Psalm seems really appropriate since the government has announced that public worship can restart. Each parish must think about how to make this happen safely and what it might look like, so there may be some delay (please bear with us). However, the Psalms of Ascents are a group of Psalms that helped prepare people on their pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem for meeting God, and therefore this is a really significant set of Psalms to explore as we perhaps feel like we are on some pilgrimage back towards public worship in our church building.

The Psalms of Ascents are a collection of 15 Psalms near the end of the book of Psalms which were used by pilgrims on their way to one of the three annual festivals in Jerusalem talked about in Exodus 23 and Deuteronomy 16. They are therefore as you might expect generally focussed on Jerusalem/Zion, Israel, the temple/House of the Lord, and on blessing and peace. They come in five groups of three, each group following a similar pattern: 1) A particular difficulty to be overcome, 2) A meditation on God's power to keep his people safe, and 3) The security of life in Zion and in God. This pattern means that overall, the focus is on remembering God's protection in the past and trusting in hope for the future through God.

Today we're particularly focussing on Psalm 124. King David is the author; a man who knew all about danger and escape from the various times he found himself in desperate danger throughout his lifetime. The Psalm is, as all of them are, intended for corporate worship and so has a liturgical feel to it, but it also contains various images and literary features which make it good Hebrew poetry at the same time.

It breaks neatly into three sections: Verses 1 to 5 form a recollection of past deliverance by God, verses 6 to 7 are praise for this deliverance, and then verse 8 is a corporate declaration of trust. There's a theme of distinction between humans and God throughout which we'll look at in a second, and the sense that nothing is beyond God's ability to deliver us, and then there is a note of hope for the future.

So, a bit of detail... (you might like to have your bible open for this)

The first thing you might notice is the repetition of 'if' and 'then' and 'when', and also the repetition of the first line. In Hebrew poetry, repetition is always important. It reinforces. The tendency for us is always to trust in the things and the powers that we can see and appreciate, and in contrast, this Psalm repeats the mantra that if God wasn't on their side, the Israelites would never have survived. Of course, David isn't stupid, he probably understands the various factors that won battles and kept him safe, or his intelligence network that would have been scouting around for his enemies. But in the end, all this extra human effort and circumstance is in service of the God who keeps Israel safe. If we were to tie this to today, we might say that it is God who has given us national security for so

long, general national health, and so on. The repetition of 'if', 'then', and 'when' serve to emphasise this. There is simple cause and effect in David's mind. If God had not been with his people, they would have lost battles, no matter how clever their strategy, overwhelming their numbers, or how well armed they were. This repetition might feel alien to us, but that's only because our modern, secular mindset has wandered off from seeing God at work in the world around us through the people he has created.

There are loads of other literary features to notice as well. There are images and similes in the first 5 verses, which alert us to the fact that these are not literal dangers being addressed, but ones which stand for other dangers. For example, in verses 2 to 5, all the dangers listed are dangers from the natural world – floods, torrents, earthquakes even – and then in verses 6 to 7, the dangers are animal-based – prey, snares and fowls. These images overall give the impression of the completeness of God's rescue, from anything that could be threatening, be that enemies, animals or environmental problems. There is nothing that God cannot rescue his people from. In our darkest dangers or most despairing moments we can know that nothing is beyond God's ability to save us.

In verse 7 there is a special literary structure used (called a chiasm where the lines form a kind of sandwich where the middle of the sandwich is emphasised) which highlights the fact that the great and narrow escape that David is writing about is not simply an escape, like a bunch of people sneaking off into the night. Instead, the snare is broken and its power is lost. The 'fowls' in the passage are actually described as a verb in the Hebrew and the verb has a sense of ongoing action. The threat of snaring by fowls is therefore a constant one. Israel was constantly under threat from one source or other, and especially so was King David, and yet each snare was broken, not just evaded. Each threat was rendered powerless. As our own society seems to lurch from one perceived threat to another with Brexit, then Covid, then economic problems, a potential new flu problem bubbling away in the far east, and so on, we can recognise this sense of ongoing snares set for us. But as we recognise them, we can also trust that God will not simply provide escape but will break the snares.

Verse 4 talks of flooding, but lost in the translation is the word 'nephesh' in Hebrew from the line, 'the torrent would have gone over us'. This 'us' is 'nephesh' and is the sense of our souls and therefore our very selves. David is saying that the danger wasn't just physical, but a danger of utter loss and ruin. But as well as that, 'nephesh' is also the word for 'throat' and so there is the ongoing image of a torrent rushing over our throats and us drowning in its foaming mass. We see so much of the world around us at the moment and feel like we will be overcome by it at times. This imagery, again, helps us as we find our place within the Psalm, and in doing so find the hope it promises too.

In verse 2, the word for 'enemies' is really significant. It's actually the Hebrew word for 'adam' (as in Adam and Eve), which generally translates as 'man'. This highlights the theme of God's protection against human enemies. There's a contrast set up between 'The Lord' being on our side when 'men' attacked us. One of the key messages is that God's people should trust in God, not humans, for their deliverance. As I said earlier, this doesn't equate to some spiritual fatalism where we despise human efforts and wait for some supernatural solution to everything, but instead it is the mindset that acknowledges that God is in control, even of the human responses. The Bible does not divide God's work from human work, and so it is right and proper for us to pray that God would inspire the scientists working on a vaccine for Covid-19, and then if/when that vaccine is available, thanking the scientists (as is polite) but worshipping and thanking God for providing deliverance.

The final verse of the Psalm continues the thought of the distinction between relying on humans in contrast to reliance on God and affirms that 'our help is in the name of the Lord.' It is God who gives hope for the future.

As I said, this Psalm is part of a pilgrimage and draws upon past remembrances of God's deliverance to fuel future trust and hope. For each person reading this Psalm in corporate worship, their minds would remember different instances of God's deliverance in each verse. Each would be reminded of different times where they felt like they were being carried away in a flood, or when the ground swallowed them in despair, or when they felt like they were being stalked. And so it is with us, we each have our own recollections of God's work in our lives and the times where we have been threatened and saved. We can all say, if God hadn't been with us, things would have been very different, and therefore we can all affirm together our faith in God for those situations in the future.

As these pilgrims approached Jerusalem and the house of God, they prepared by affirming God's protection on their journey and committing themselves to relying on God's protection in future. This affirmation of God's power to protect prepared them to come into God's presence as a people who relied upon God and were grateful to him. They would meet this God in the temple, and bring their sacrifices to him in gratitude, before returning home, their minds safe in the knowledge of God's ongoing protection whatever they would face.

When we approach public worship again, wouldn't it be great if, as we wait, to think again about all the times God has delivered us before in each circumstance of life; and how God has, in Jesus, delivered us from guilt and fear of death; so that when we do get back to public worship we are able to affirm together: Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth. This Psalm may be for all of us a great preparation as we approach worship. Amen.